

The Working Undergrad:

An autobiographical narrative of how taking on full-time employment can affect academic fulfillment

By

Joetta Francis

Submitted to the Board of Study in Sociology
School of Natural and Social Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York
May 2020

Accepted:

_____, Sponsor
Matthew Immergut

_____, Second Reader

Krystal Perkins

Obtaining a college degree is a rite of passage being pursued by graduating high school students all over the country. A college degree has the power to completely alter the course of one's life for the better, which is why it is sought out by so many. While the number of students going to college is increasing, the number of students graduating is not. A study done by Duke University showed there to be a 5% decrease in the likelihood of 25 years old ability to obtain a bachelor's degree. While many things can contribute to dropout rates rising, I believe financial hardship to be the main factor. With the yearly cost of education continuing to increase from state to state, students are being left with the task to find the funds for their education themselves. Some look to scholarships or take out massive loans to cover the cost that is education. Others are forced to pay their way through by way of full-time employment. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the effects that employment can have on the academic success of a student pursuing an undergraduate degree.

Literature review

A Step Towards Mobility

Education as a means of advancement

Social mobility can be defined as the movement of individuals, families, or groups through a system of social hierarchy or stratification (Britannica). In other words, it is the ability to positively make your way up a social class system and increase your status. In a society like ours, mobility is assumed to be possible because we reflect a class system and not a caste system. Our mobility is dependent on our attainment (hard you work) and not our assignment (sex given at birth). It is adaptable, however, upward mobility does not look the same for all. In most cases, it can be a lot more difficult and nearly impossible for some. This is because individual characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, and wealth can directly impact individual mobility. Some people see mobility as going directly into the workforce, taking on years of physical labor, and literally working their way up the class system. Others go to school. Education has allowed for those who are able to follow through with it a way to improve their social status and be considered for higher-level jobs at quicker and more efficient rates than those without it. Having a college degree attached to your name can be the determining factor in your career earnings. This is why we see a surge in the number of college applicants deriving from low-income backgrounds with intentions to climb the economic ladder.

Inadequate Funding

A rise in the number of employed undergrads

Many Students deriving from low-income neighborhoods apply to college based on the belief that it will guarantee them mobility. This is partly true. A survey done by LendEDU found that 51% of college students dropped out of school due to their costs. Not wanting to become another statistic, many students pick up part-time or full-time jobs in order to pay their way through college. Undergraduate students having to is nothing new. What is new, however, is the increase in the number of hours they are working. A study done by Manchester Metropolitan University found that student is working more than in their prior school year. As a result of these same students report lower levels of achievement in education as well as their grades to continuously drop.

Getting to college

Going to college has always been a dream of mine. It's been embedded into my brain since the young age of six. Even though I didn't fully understand the concept of it all I knew I had to make it there. Where I'm from, obtaining a college degree isn't too common. The majority of the kids around me didn't speak much on their aspirations for post-secondary education. The conversation would usually end with what area of the workforce they planned to enter because their vision of education ended with the 12th grade. And so I was one of the lucky ones. In the 8th grade, I was introduced to a youth development program located in Harlem called StreetSquash. This non-profit organization benefited me and the other students who were a part of it in many ways. It improved our academic performance, athletic agility, and social skills just to name a few. The most important thing this afterschool program did was ensure that their students graduate from college and matriculate into college. They did this by requiring all

students from grades 9-12 to attend weekly college preparatory sessions. These sessions were not optional because they knew the kinds of schools the kids in this program were coming from. Often overpopulated and underfunded, they wanted to cover the things they knew colleges would look to. In these sessions, they focused on improving our standardized test-taking skills, writing skills, active community service involvement and so much more. Attending these weekly intensives prepared me to be a more apted candidate for college applications. In the Spring of 2016, their job was done. I received more than 10 college acceptances and was prepared to embark on my journey towards higher education.

Making SUNY Purchase my choice

It's no secret that low-income students have been excluded from the world of higher education. It's not as explicit as one may think. No college has a banner stating "no poor applicants will be granted admission" because that would be illegal. Instead, the students that derive from these low-income communities are being faced with obstacles every step that they take towards higher education. These obstacles make it harder or even impossible for most to achieve something as minimal as a highschool diploma. A subpar education was just one of the many things that are guaranteed when you come from poverty. This is common knowledge. This is why you see a plethora of projects such as "college-ready programs" that offer that extra push to try and level the playing field. One of those initiatives that aim towards combating this educational disparity is EOP. originating in the 1960s, these Educational Opportunity Programs (EOP) combined access, academic support and supplemental financial assistance to make higher education possible for students who have the potential to succeed at a SUNY college, despite

poor preparation and limited financial resources. EOP made it so that "every student capable of completing a program of higher education should have the opportunity to do so" (Rockefeller). I am one of those students. As I mentioned before, I was accepted into a few colleges. The deciding factor that made Purchase my #1 choice was the fact that I was accepted into their EOP program. This program offered me more financial support than all my other acceptances combined. So the choice was simple. This is where I would begin my journey towards my undergraduate degree.

My first year at SUNY Purchase was amazing. With the continual support from StreetSquash, my college-ready program back at home, as well as EOP, my college support program on campus, I had an ample amount of support. My transition from high school to college was much more achievable than I expected it to have been. Having to focus on only my studies, I managed to maintain a 3.0 GPA for my freshman year. I felt so accomplished. I was able to prove that I was one of the kids capable of obtaining a higher education but just needed the extra help to prove so. Unfortunately, this was the last year I would see my cumulative GPA that high. My entire college career was about to be damaged as a result of something that was completely out of my control. My mother got remarried.

Finding my own income

This resulted in my financial aid being decreased by about \$10,000, completely throwing my financial aid out of whack. Combining my mother and her spouse's income FAFSA came to the conclusion that I didn't necessarily need as much as they previously offered. This could not be further from the truth. Even with all the financial aid that was offered to me prior to the

marriage, I still was responsible for paying my e-Bill, an out of pocket monthly balance, of \$200. My e-Bill for the academic year following this marriage increased to over \$500 dollars. I couldn't look to my mom who had her own financial situations to handle back home. I had to take matters into my own hands and enter the workforce. My first job as an undergraduate was located off-campus. It consisted of me babysitting as well as tutoring one middle school girl three days a week for 4hrs a day. The most challenging thing about this was the travel. Due to the fact that I didn't have a car I had to travel by way of the bus and train. The job site was nothing more than a 25min drive away from campus. Using public transportation, this commute took me just over 1hr and a half. I would get back to campus after 8 pm too drained to complete any work. The job itself wasn't bad, however, I wasn't making enough money for me to clear my monthly e-Bill. So, I had to pick up another job. My second job was a weekend job at a restaurant located in Portchester, which was only a 15min drive from campus. I did not have a car and there was no feasible public transportation route to the restaurant. My only option was to take an uber, which was \$16 each way, to and from the restaurant every Friday, Saturday, and occasionally Sundays. Each shift left me completely drained. There's something comical about coming back to campus and attempting to complete classwork after an 8hr shift. Over time it merely did not happen. Not because I didn't want to, but simply because I couldn't. My brain was worn out. This was only the start of the fight for my education.

My e-Bill would continue rising every academic school year, despite me accepting all the loans and grants that were awarded to me. I spoke with my EOP advisor daily, trying to find a way to increase the amount of aid I was being offered. I even applied to a number of private scholarships not connected to SUNY Purchase, which I unfortunately never received. And so,

working became my only option. By my senior year, this monthly payment reached \$1,1018. I was working over 40+ hours a week between two jobs to ensure that I could continue the pursuit of my degree. While being able to pay the remainder of my tuition all on my own sounds valorous, it was a nightmare. My classwork and grades began to take the back seat. I let working consume me because it meant being able to continue my studies.

Effects on my education

While my tuition increased, my course load simultaneously did the same. My classes began getting harder and I couldn't afford to invest the extra time needed into them. I was stuck in this vicious cycle where I would pick up an excessive amount of work hours just to ensure that I could remain a student, but be disappointed in myself for producing mediocre work due to the number of hours I was working. One was clearly a result of the other, but I had to have them both. I knew my employers saw me as disposable, so I had to always make myself available in fear that they would replace me with someone else. As a result, my GPA began to decrease. I was becoming a student who just met deadlines instead of one that puts their best work forward. I could never bring myself to explain the struggles I was experiencing to my professors or educators, out of fear that they may see me as someone who just makes excuses. After all, I wasn't the only undergrad who had to manage the two roles of employment and classwork. To them, I was just another student experiencing the natural waning effect that almost all students go through, but there was nothing natural about it.

Conclusion

The number of undergrad students working is on the rise. Because it's becoming more and more common there should be an ongoing conversation about how universities can better support these students. Some work because they want the experience and others, like myself, work because they have to. This small, but growing, population of students working because of necessity are at a higher risk of stretching themselves too thin. Only having the time to do either classwork or clock in can be draining. Not having enough time in the day to find a healthy outlet to relieve these stressors can be a major factor in not being able to complete their degree. Without adequate support, academic attainment for these students can be obsolete. In addition to this, they can experience higher levels of stress and unidentified anxieties that make completing their degree seem impossible. If universities want to do a greater good for this overlooked population, they should try investing more funding into supporting the mental well being of these students who may often feel alone and overlooked. Supporting these students can in turn decrease dropout rates and increase retention rates, creating a win-win situation resulting in the greater good for everyone.

Work Cited

1. Broadbridge, A., & Swanson, V. (2006). Managing Two Roles. *Community, Work & Family, 9*(2), 159–179.
2. Curtis, S., & Shani, N. (2002). The Effect of Taking Paid Employment During Term-time on Students Academic Studies. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 26*(2), 129–138.
3. Hawkins, C. A., Smith, M. L., Hawkins, I. R. C., & Grant, D. (2005). The Relationships Among Hours Employed, Perceived Work Interference, And Grades As Reported By Undergraduate Social Work Students. *Journal of Social Work Education, 41*(1), 13–27
4. Hunt, A., Lincoln, I., & Walker, A. (2004). Term-time employment and academic attainment: evidence from a large-scale survey of undergraduates at Northumbria University. *Journal of Further and Higher Education,*
5. Nunley, J. M., Pugh, A., Romero, N., & Seals, R. A. (2016). College major, internship experience, and employment opportunities: Estimates from a résumé audit. *Labour Economics, 38,* 37–46.
6. Wantanabe, L. E. (2005). The Effects of College Student Employment on Academic Achievement. *The Pegasus Review: UCF Undergraduate Research Journal, 1*(Inaugural Issue).

7. Rivera, L. A. (2011). Ivies, extracurriculars, and exclusion: Elite employers' use of educational credentials. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 29(1), 71–90.
8. Pike, G. R., & Kuh, G. D. (2005). First- and Second-Generation College Students: A Comparison of Their Engagement and Intellectual Development. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 76(3), 276–300.
9. Micari, M., & Pazos, P. (2012). Connecting to the Professor: Impact of the Student-Faculty Relationship in a Highly Challenging Course. *College Teaching*, 60(2), 41–47.
10. Bettinger, E. (2004). How Financial Aid Affects Persistence. *National Bureau of Economic Research* .
11. 3.9 Million Students Dropped Out of College With Debt in 2015 and 2016. (2017, November 7). Retrieved from <https://www.usnews.com/news/data-mine/articles/2017-11-07/federal-data-show-39-million-students-dropped-out-of-college-with-debt-in-2015-and-2016>